

Saint Stanislaus Kostka



by Father Richard Brennan, S.J.

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Paul Kostka and his friends had far to go. Their journey was a long one even for young men with good horses. Sometimes they talked and sang as they rode but more often they rode silently, like men with a purpose. They had much of Poland to cross then through what we call Czecho-Slovakia and Austria and finally down Italy to Rome, a distance of over a thousand miles. Rome was Paul's goal but he was not going as a pilgrim but to bring his young brother back to Poland. For a long time now his young brother had been making trouble for him and as he rode along Paul brooded over the years.

Young Stanislaus

Stanislaus had always been difficult, Paul thought, even when he was a child. It was right to be a good Catholic of course but there was no need for all that praying for a normal boy. Then there was that most embarrassing habit of Stanislaus when a guest told a good story. Paul could still remember with distress the first time that one of the guests at Rostkov Castle told a smutty story when Stanislaus was present. No one had any idea that Stanislaus was going to make a scene as he was a quiet youngster. But he did make a scene, and with vengeance. He had first blushed violently, tears welled from his eyes and then to cap it all he had fainted. It was not just once that such a thing happened. It recurred sufficiently often for their father to know the tell-tale signs of Stanislaus distress. Father would then make an effort to change the drift of the conversation and if the storyteller were too obtuse to take the hint their father would say, We had better talk of something else or we shall

see our young Stanislaus raise his eyes to heaven and then fall headlong under the table.'

That was always Stanislaus' trouble, Paul reflected; he was not broadminded like himself. He thought ruefully of his own later efforts to broaden his brothers mind.

As they rode southwards through Poland, Paul was reminded of the first time he had made that journey. He was not going to Rome on that occasion but only to Vienna on his way to college. He had been about fifteen and his father had decided that he needed proper education. There were no suitable schools in Poland so father had made up his mind to send himself and Stanislaus to the new Jesuit College at Vienna. Up to that time they had had a tutor to teach them at home, Doctor Bilinski, though Bilinski was not a doctor in those days.

Doctor Bilinski

Bilinski had accompanied the brothers to Vienna to look after them. Paul smiled as he thought about that journey. Poor Bilinski! He was supposed to be in charge but it did not work out that way. Paul could remember how he himself had gradually taken over the role of authority and it had not been difficult to do so, for though the tutor was a clever man at his books, he was not fit to rule a young nobleman like himself. After a few days on the road it was Paul who had directed operations; it was he who had decided how far they would ride during the day and where they would stay the night.

Vienna

It was a pity that when they got to Vienna he had not been able to retain his authority as he might have been able to

knock a bit of sense into young Stanislaus but the Jesuits who ran the college would have no authority but their own. What a place that college was! It was utterly overcrowded, with priests and boys living on top of each other. And they were expected to study hard, in fact they were forced to study hard. The Jesuits did not seem to realise that here they had a Polish noble and they had ordered him around like any other boy. Now as he followed the road, after the lapse of a few years, he was going to show them who was master.

Stanislaus had actually seemed to enjoy the circumscribed college life of order and discipline, work and prayer, and for some reason that was beyond understanding, Stanislaus was most popular, not just with the Jesuits which would have been understandable, but with the other boys. Yes, he had to admit it, even to himself, Stanislaus was better liked than he was. This period, however, had lasted only eight months. The Jesuits had been made to close the boarding school though they kept the day school open.

As he passed through Vienna now, en route for Rome, Paul remembered all that had happened in detail. When the boarding school had closed down he had not been sure what to do, so he had sought out Bilinski who was still in the city. They decided to remain in Vienna - it would have been ridiculous to give up such a chance of freedom - and to attend the day school. What relief it had been to get away from the boarding school restrictions and to have good digs and to be able to come and go at will! Paul was now in a position to show Stanislaus how a nobleman should live.

The House of Kimberker

It was only natural that they should look for the best possible apartments in town. Senator Kimberker had a fine suite of rooms and was willing to let them to an aristocrat of

the Kostka family. Bilinski had, of course, fallen in with the idea but, for the first time since their arrival at Vienna, Stanislaus had been difficult. Stanislaus did not wish to live in the house of a man who was anti-Catholic. But what did it matter what religious beliefs the owner of the house had? Paul had no intention whatsoever of giving up his faith but he had to insist on having really fashionable quarters. Perhaps he had made a little mistake about that for Senator Kimberker later refused entrance to a Catholic priest when Stanislaus was very ill. It was not very important anyhow as Stanislaus had recovered. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes and he really had to show his young brother who was in charge.

Senator Kimberker's house was certainly very different from the over-crowded boarding school. There had been ten of them altogether in the apartment; himself and Stanislaus, four other young Polish nobles, including two Kostka cousins, three servants and the inevitable Bilinski. They were still supposed to attend classes at the Jesuit school but once classes were finished they were their own masters. Stanislaus had been a bit of a nuisance and made it awkward for the rest of them by never missing classes as they did but he, Paul, always dispatched a servant when he was not coming to let the Fathers know that he was indisposed. It had cost little to be polite to his masters.

Training in Nobility

Now that the boarding school was no more, Paul had really set about training Stanislaus in earnest. He did not approve of his young brother getting up for Mass every morning or of his long prayers but as they did not do anyone any great harm he had been prepared to tolerate such practices. In some ways however he had to take a firm line as Stanislaus was really a disgrace to the fair name of Kostka. Stanislaus

must be educated. He did not even know how to dance. As elder brother Paul decided that such ignorance must be remedied forthwith, so Stanislaus had taken lessons, He had also pointed out to Stanislaus that he did not dress as became a noble but Stanislaus did nothing about it. Paul had reminded his brother that their father had sent them to Vienna to mix with people of quality and that he was neglecting his duty by not doing so. He had impressed on him that it was possible to be a good Catholic without dressing badly and staying at home all the time. Of course he could really not have gone out with them to parties and theatre dressed as he was so it had been very difficult. He had tried everything to bring the boy to his senses. He had pleaded, threatened and cajoled, but Stanislaus had remained stubborn. He had told Stanislaus that he was bringing shame and disgrace on the good name of the family. Bilinski had said that he sometimes went too far in his reproaches but what did Bilinski know about nobility? He, Paul Kostka, knew his duty and he did it.

At Death's Door

Paul could not forget the fright he had in December 1566 when Stanislaus was gravely ill. They had got doctors and done what they could to help the boy. Stanislaus had seemed to be dying and wanted a priest but Senator Kimberker was very bitter on the subject of priests and would not allow one to enter his house on any pretext. How hard they had worked in their care of Stanislaus! No one had ever been so well looked after. He could remember Bilinski, who was more frightened than the rest, sitting up with the patient day and night. Bilinski had said something about an angel bringing Holy Communion to Stanislaus. He had never got full truth about that, but whatever happened, Stanislaus had got better suddenly. The doctors could not explain the sudden recovery but it was certainly a relief to Paul himself

when things could return to normal. Now that Stanislaus was well again Paul had expected him to be grateful for all their kindness and to behave like a gentleman for the future.

But Stanislaus had not behaved according to his brother's wishes and had become, if anything, more difficult than before. While the servants went about their duties they were often terrified at the sight of Stanislaus kneeling in a trance, and the woman who did the laundry complained of blood on his clothes due to his fantastic habit of scourging himself. One of the servants had also found a shirt that most certainly had not come from his tailor for it was of haircloth.

The World That Passes

As he thought over the next eight months, Paul was not altogether happy about how he had acted. Shortly after the illness he had asked Stanislaus why he could not behave like everyone else. Stanislaus had answered he was not created for the world that passes but for eternity which lasts forever. What exactly had he meant by that? Did he think he was better than the rest of them with all his prayers and disciplines and vigils? It was quite ridiculous for a younger brother to set himself up as a judge of what was the right thing to do

Finding that neither himself nor his friends could prevail on Stanislaus to change his habits either by ridicule or threats they were driven to resort to physical violence. When they found the boy still praying as they came in from a party at night he got a few kicks. Once or twice things did get out of hand as on the occasion when they knocked him down and kicked him.

Escape

Even now as he rode towards Rome, Paul realised that he had made some miscalculations during that last period but that his greatest mistake was to tell Stanislaus to clear off. He never thought that his brother would take him at his word. Of course the Jesuits must have been behind the flight but it had been humiliating to find himself outwitted by a sixteen year old boy. How he had dreaded the prospect of explaining the matter to their father though in fact he had not been asked to explain very much. Father had been furious it was true but his anger was directed against the Jesuits and not against Paul. Paul had been saved a lot of difficulty by a report which had reached Rostkov Castle before him that Father Peter Canisius had dared to receive Stanislaus into his order. John Kostka was not one to accept such treatment and had immediately started the machinery working that would bring his younger son back to Poland. Then the news had arrived that Stanislaus had been taken to Rome and this complicated matters further. But now it was all fixed and he, Paul, was armed with full authority and all the necessary documents which would force the Jesuits to allow him to take his brother home.

It was a relief to Paul that it had all worked out so well in the end and that he was now riding to Rome to undo the mischief. He was angry that Stanislaus had led him such a dance but rejoiced that he was about to come out on top. It was over a year since Stanislaus had run away.

September was not yet over in 1568 when Paul Kostka rode into Rome. With him rode an escort of friends and retainers. He would impress the Jesuits with his show of might.

Business in Rome

Paul did not want to delay his business in Rome for long. It was too late for action on the evening they arrived but on

the following morning they mounted their horses and rode to Sant' Andrea, the Jesuit Noviciate. Paul jumped from his horse and strode towards the house. He banged peremptorily on the door. After a moments delay it was opened by the Brother Porter. Paul wasted no time in polite greetings but told the Brother who he was and that he had come to fetch his brother Stanislaus. 'Go and get him at once!' he ordered the Brother. The Brother looked surprised but said nothing. He showed Paul Kostka into the reception room and asked him to wait for a moment.

After a brief delay Father Julius Fazio came into the room. Paul repeated his demand to have his brother brought to him at once. 'Your brother Stanislaus died four weeks ago.'

Quietly the Father told him how Stanislaus had died; That he had lived and died a saint. All Rome revered him and it was strange that even in the few hours that he had been in Rome that Paul had not heard of it. Stanislaus was not being forgotten. He was spoken of everywhere and many people were praying to him rather than for him. Paul sent a messenger to dismiss the riders who had come with him to Sant' Andrea and asked to be taken to his brother's grave.

As he knelt at the graveside Paul broke down and cried like a child. There he realised for the first time what he had done to his brother. The sudden change was not a passing one. He understood what he had been and what he had done. Never again was he the bragging bully but lived a life of penance and reparation for the past. The change was so radical that it can scarcely be explained by the shock of the news. From that time on Paul saw his life in a completely new light and never ceased to mourn the treatment he had meted out to Stanislaus.

Mission Not Completed

Paul left Rome as soon as possible to bring the sad news to his father and mother. They were dismayed at the news but listened avidly to the extraordinary story of their sons heroic sanctity. The father did not long survive Stanislaus and a few days after his father's death Albert, Stanislaus' younger brother, also died.

Paul stayed at home with his mother until she died. He did not marry but devoted himself to charitable works and prayer and penance. When he was fifty-six he asked to be admitted into the Society of Jesus. His request for admission was made with great humility, not for his own merit, he said, but because he was the brother of Stanislaus. His request was heard but before he could start his noviceship he died a holy death on November 13th, now the feast of Saint Stanislaus, 1607.

In the earlier pages we have been viewing Stanislaus Kostka through the eyes of his elder brother Paul. Paul had judged his brother by his own standards and up to the time when he learned of Stanislaus' death his standards were both worldly and selfish. It would be a mistake to regard Paul as vicious but he was inflated by an exaggerated idea of his own importance and judged others by himself.

Paul and Stanislaus

It is interesting to consider the similarities and differences of the two brothers. They were similar in their Catholic background and were both brought up in the love of God and their family. The family was both noble and wealthy so the boy never knew want or privation. They were both cheerful and popular yet even in their cheerfulness and popularity there was a tremendous difference.

Paul was always selfish and loved to show off what a noble fellow he was. He was inconsiderate as selfish people always are. He was determined that all should recognise his importance.

Stanislaus was much quieter and less talkative. Very early in life he seems to have realised that nobility does not consist in showing off but in living one's life according to God's plan. After all, God had created him for something: he must find out just what that something was and, knowing it, he must have the strength to carry it out. To know what he should do and to have the courage to do it required more than human strength so he sought guidance and help from God. He could never have been satisfied with drifting through life. He was ambitious because he knew that God makes every man for greatness. The idea of being a priest does not seem to have occurred to him until his serious illness in Vienna.

Paul undoubtedly regarded Stanislaus' violent reaction to off-colour stories as prudish and childish though in reality it showed rather his strength. Stanislaus was mature enough to realise how dangerous such stories and conversations can be. He knew that poisonous stories are to the soul what poison is to the body. No one is likely to suggest that one who breathes in poison gas should be regarded as more adult than one who tries to prevent the gas from entering his system. One who risks his life to save others is a hero but one who takes risks without reason is a fool.

As Stanislaus Kostka was a very normal boy, nothing much has been reported about his early years except some references to his habits of prayer, his consideration for others and his popularity.

He was not yet fourteen when he was sent to Vienna to study. The first eight months there seem to have been

among the happiest of his life. He enjoyed the boarding school life with its regularity and opportunities for prayer and study. He enjoyed the close friendship of the Fathers and his companions.

Many of these contemporaries gave evidence of Stanislaus' holiness after his death. He was not a great talker, his expression was calm and pleasant. He was a very modest boy. On weekdays he used to attend three Masses, the first and second before and after the first lecture and the third at the end of the morning classes. On Sunday he spent most of his time in church and heard as many Masses as he could.

My Dear Mother

Stanislaus had an extraordinary love and devotion to the mother of God. At a later stage of his life he was asked by Father de Sa, 'Do you really love Our Lady?' 'What a question, Father! Mary is my dear Mother.' Though the Sodality of Our Lady had not yet been canonically established there was a sodality of Our Lady in the college at Vienna with Saint Barbara as its secondary patron. Laurence Pacifici, who was the personal servant of Paul and Stanislaus Kostka, while also attending the Jesuit college with them, wrote of his young master later, when he himself was a Canon of San Mose in Venice: 'Stanislaus was extraordinarily given to prayer, and though he went to the school of the reverend Jesuit Fathers, and was at that time in the class of Rhetoric, he never cared for worldly eloquence. Hence his speeches, such as students were accustomed to deliver, were generally about Our Lady, to whom he had a great devotion in the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin and Saint Barbara, which is held there in great reverence and of which he and many other students were members.'

During these eight months, brother Paul had little influence on Stanislaus. An elder brother has no authority in a boarding school where everything works according to a set rule and order. Stanislaus took part in all the normal school activities. He took his part in the recreations and games, did his work very well, prayed at any time he had free and endeared himself to all. Though the other boys knew that he differed from themselves in his long hours of prayer and his penances, they were not in any way antagonised because he did not try to impose his way of life on them and he was always most considerate and obliging.

When Maximilian II repossessed the building which the Jesuits used as the Vienna boarding school Stanislaus was naturally distressed. He was much more distressed when Paul insisted on renting rooms belonging to the anti-Catholic Kimberker. But there was no redress for him and there he must stay for over two years while he and Paul continued as day pupils in the college. In the subsequent period Paul emerges as a vain and selfish bully. The servant-student, Laurence Pacifici, again gives us some information. 'Paul Kostka, the elder brother, led rather too free a life, and he was somewhat wild, and given to as great vanity in his style of dress and in his conversation as his tutor would allow.'

Day Boys

It is not possible to give the exact order of events while the boys lived at Kimberker's house. The period, however, divides itself up into the twenty-one months which preceded Stanislaus' illness and the eight months which followed it.

Paul, as we already know, rented the rooms and got four other young Polish nobles to join himself, Stanislaus and Bilinski. He also engaged three men-servants, including Pacifici, who later provided so much information as to what

went on in the house. Pacifici has this much to say about himself at the period in question: 'The two brothers attended the school of the reverend Jesuit Fathers, and I, with them: he (Stanislaus) went to the school and studied Rhetoric along with me.'

Paul was not a little irregular in his attendance at school. He had behaved reasonably while he was in the boarding school, but now he had not a bell to wake him in the morning and he was often tired after his somewhat hectic evenings of amusement. Stanislaus, who apart from being a saint, had much more sense than his brother, got up, not only early enough for classes but in time for the early Mass and he never missed weekly Confession and Holy Communion and the daily Rosary and visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

Why Paul could not leave Stanislaus alone is not so easy to understand. Was it in order to justify himself that he decided to teach Stanislaus to live as he did? He could not really take exception to him going to Mass or saying his prayers. But probably to justify his own conduct he asserted that Stanislaus was not living as a young nobleman should and that he was not meeting the right people or learning the essential art of noble living.

Fine Feathers

Paul Kostka exemplifies a type of young man whom one could meet in any age, in the twentieth century as in the sixteenth. He had lived under authority while at home but when he got some liberty in Vienna he was determined to use it to show off. At seventeen he had all the answers. He knew what should be done so he dressed up to show that he was different. Needless to say he had his followers. His roommates were willing to follow the leader. The refusal of

Stanislaus to follow his example of stupidity was something he could not stomach. Willy-nilly he would bring Stanislaus to heel.

Stanislaus was the last person on earth to cause trouble and as long as Paul's wishes and commands did not interfere with his work or prayer he was prepared to fall in with these wishes. When Paul insisted that he learn how to dance, Stanislaus agreed to take lessons even though he did not like dancing.

Though Paul had been going much too far in seeking amusement there was no one to restrain him. When matters got out of hand Bilinski did attempt to remonstrate with him, but the tutor had long since lost any little authority he may have had at the beginning and Paul ignored him. It may well be that Paul's pleasure-seeking did not involve anything very evil but there is no doubt that he was completely out of control and that instead of being in a position to give orders he needed a strong hand to keep him in order. While realising that Paul was living dangerously Stanislaus knew that he could do nothing about it so he kept his peace. It was sad that Paul could not tolerate sanctity so close to him. All during the period while they lived at Kimberker's house he had sneered at his brother's way of life and encouraged his companions to do the same, but it was only during the last eight months at Vienna that he seems to have resorted to physical violence.

Paul found fault with Stanislaus because the latter would not dress up as he did. No one at the college, neither masters nor boys noticed anything unusual about Stanislaus' dress but then Paul wanted to be unusual. Paul also resented the fact that his brother would not wear gloves and that he would not have a servant to carry his books to the college each morning. Stanislaus regarded it as ridiculous to ask

someone to carry the books which he could carry just as easily himself.

One of Paul's greatest annoyances was the presence of his brother when they were entertaining guests at the apartment. Stanislaus could scarcely excuse himself on the plea of ill-health as he was known to be a healthy and robust young man. He was usually present then and Paul was on tenter-hooks in case his brother might stage one of his fainting bouts at an off-colour story. Stanislaus was truly infuriating in Paul's eyes and because he did not know how to deal with the situation which arose he upbraided his brother for bringing shame on the family.

Broad-Minded

Paul, like his modern counterpart, tried to convince himself that it was manly and broadminded to drink and tell stories of a doubtful nature. Broadmindedness for him consisted in living uselessly and selfishly and putting God's will in second place. It is true that a boy as closely united to God as Stanislaus can withstand the propaganda of selfishness but a lesser man would have fallen by the wayside. In the face of the persecution that he had to endure Stanislaus emerges as a man of the greatest courage, both physical and moral.

Every boy needs a certain amount of relaxation if he is to remain in good health. When classes are over he can relax at home or play games. While the boarding school was open Stanislaus had his normal relaxation but once that was gone and he was lodged at Kimberker's house what was there for him after school? He enjoyed his school work but when it was finished and he returned to the apartment he had no one who was a friend. As a result there was nothing for Stanislaus except to retire to solitude and live in loneliness. As he had to remain in Vienna, even during the holidays,

this was particularly trying. He was a healthy boy but no health could stand up to a life in which the place of a loving family was taken by pretty persecutors.

For a year and nine months Stanislaus health held out.

In December 1566 his health was poor. He could scarcely eat and he had to drag himself out in the morning. Paul and his companions thought that Stanislaus was fasting and that he was being difficult. They were not sufficiently interested to realise that he was ill.

Collapse

On December 18th they got a surprise. For the first time since they had come to the house they found that Stanislaus was still in bed when they woke up. One look at him convinced them that he was very ill. His face was pale and haggard. He was feverish and in obvious pain. They were all very frightened, especially Paul, who realised that if anything happened to his brother he would have to explain it at home. It was quite obvious even to them that the boy was not just indisposed but dangerously ill. They sent to the college to inform the Jesuits. Paul himself was responsible for the fact that the Fathers could do nothing for Stanislaus except to pray for him. There was not the slightest chance that Kimberker would allow a priest into the house, let alone a Jesuit.

They got doctors for Stanislaus who did not seem to achieve much. They themselves nursed him and remained at his bedside day and night. Bilinski was outstanding in his devoted service for the sick boy. All realised how serious was Stanislaus' illness and would have done anything to help him except to procure for him the one boon he asked for repeatedly - Holy Viaticum. Whenever he asked they did not

answer but told him that he would be all right and he was not going to die. They were in fact very much afraid that he was going to die but saw no hope of getting a priest into the house.

Seeing that a priest was not coming to him Stanislaus had recourse to prayer. He sought the intercession of Saint Barbara who was not only the patroness of his Sodality, but also the special patron of those who desire to die fortified by the Last Sacraments.

The First Miracle

God does not leave his most devoted friends in grave distress of soul and one night when Bilinski was dozing at Stanislaus' bedside Saint Barbara appeared and with her, two angels, one of them holding in his hands the Blessed Sacrament. Stanislaus managed to get out of bed and to kneel down telling Bilinski to kneel too. Three times Stanislaus repeated the words, 'Lord, I am not worthy' and then opened his mouth to receive the Eucharist. He remained kneeling until Bilinski made him get back into bed. Shortly afterwards Stanislaus was favoured with another divine visitation.

This time it was Our Lady carrying the Divine Infant. Our Lady put the Infant Jesus into Stanislaus' arms and told him he was to enter the Society that bears her Son's name.

It might be easy to question these divine apparitions, in spite of the evidence, but for the fact of Stanislaus' sudden cure. When Bilinski looked at the boy in the morning Stanislaus was awake and normal colour had returned to his cheeks. He asked for his clothes so that he could get up and go to the church to thank God for his cure but Bilinski would not let him up until he had permission from the doctors.

These could not understand how the boy who had been at death's door the previous day was now fully recovered. The recovery was complete for there was no convalescence and Stanislaus was back to full normal health.

Persecution

Paul and the others had been most devoted during Stanislaus' illness but now that the crisis was over so was their kindness. Paul not only recontinued his jibes and sneers but he initiated a real persecution. It was not only hard words that Stanislaus had to endure but constant violence and blows.

It is not possible to determine what started this persecution but once started it became increasingly violent. Likely enough Paul imagined that after the pains he had taken over his brother during his illness Stanislaus would try to fit in with his plans afterwards. When he found that if anything Stanislaus was more given to prayer and penance than before his anger was unlimited. As for Stanislaus, now that he had been told by Our Lady that he was to become a Jesuit, he considered himself entirely devoted to God. The tale of persecution is not an edifying one but we know that Stanislaus' persecutors were afterwards heartily ashamed of their behaviour. We can mention some of the incidents which were afterwards admitted by those responsible.

Rozrazewski, one of Paul's co-lodgers and friends, related that one night when he was unable to sleep he saw Stanislaus get out of bed and prostrate himself on his face in prayer. 'Thereupon, I got up, and went quietly up to him; and pretending that I had not seen him, I kicked him savagely, and jumped upon him with all my weight.' This testimony of Rozrazewski was given under oath.

One of the Kostka cousins, whose name was also Stanislaus, reproached himself: 'Oh, how often have I stamped upon that blessed youth when we were students abroad and he was prostrate on the ground, whilst the others were asleep.'

The Elder Brother

The treatment Stanislaus received from his own brother was the most violent. Paul repeatedly knocked his brother down, mercilessly kicked him and stamped on him so that Bilinski more than once had to drag him away and insist on him letting Stanislaus alone.

It was after a day of particularly brutal treatment that Stanislaus had warned Paul: 'Your rough treatment will end in my going away never to return, and you will have to explain my leaving to our father and mother.' Paul was so infuriated that he had told him to clear off, never dreaming that Stanislaus would take him at his word. The next morning Stanislaus was gone on his first long walk.

Before going into any details about that journey we must consider the question of Stanislaus' religious vocation. There is no evidence that he had contemplated becoming a Jesuit before his illness. He was seeking the closest union with God and leaving it to Him to lead him on the right road. His attitude was 'Here I am Lord!' He could scarcely have considered the religious life as a genuine possibility because his father, though a good Christian in other respects, would not hear of giving his son to God's special service.

Stanislaus knew that he would need his father's consent before the Jesuits of Vienna would admit him as a novice. All that was clear to him, but as Our Lady had told him to join the Society which took its name from her Son he must obey.

Perhaps Our Lady would show him later how to obey her command.

After his illness he had applied to the Jesuits for admission and while his confessor had encouraged him he also warned him that his father's permission would be necessary. Though Father Nicholas Doni had been Stanislaus, confessor for a long time and knew his sanctity, he was surprised, not at the fact that Stanislaus wished to be a Jesuit priest, but that his request for admission was made without any preliminary discussion. Stanislaus had to tell him of the apparition and command of Our Lady. Father Doni refused to give a definite opinion as to Stanislaus' suitability but told him to pray and come back in a week. When Stanislaus returned and they had discussed the matter further Father Doni had to admit that the young man was truly a suitable candidate and told him to go and see the Father Provincial - Father Laurence Maggi.

Father Maggi was quite satisfied with Stanislaus and having ascertained from him that his confessor approved, told him that he could be accepted, on condition, of course, that his parents approved.

Hopeless Cause

The approval of his parents was something that Stanislaus knew he had not the slightest hope of receiving. When Cardinal Commendone came to Vienna shortly afterwards Stanislaus decided to ask him to intercede for him. Cardinal Commendone was at the time Papal Legate to the Imperial Court. He was a friend of the Jesuits and had met the Kostka family while in Poland. The Cardinal asked Father Maggi to receive Stanislaus but when the Father Provincial reminded him of the danger of receiving a noble without his parents' consent the Cardinal agreed it would be better not to.

Stanislaus continued to pray and especially to ask Our Lady's help after this setback. After all, it was Our Lady who had given him instructions to become a Jesuit. Perhaps as a result of his prayers, Stanislaus was inspired to consult the well-known preacher and spiritual director, Father Francis Antonio. Father Antonio agreed that nothing much could be done in Vienna and suggested that Stanislaus should apply to the Provincial of upper Germany, Father Peter Canisius. The influence of the Kostka family was scarcely great enough to worry anyone at Augsburg.

Father Antonio has been much criticised for the advice he gave to Stanislaus, especially by the saint's biographer Father Sacchini. Whether Father Antonio was wise or not we don't have to decide but we do know that the advice literally helped Stanislaus on the road to sanctity.

Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother

How could it be right for Stanislaus to go against his parents' wishes?

This question of obedience is far too important to pass over without some explanation. Stanislaus knew that his

parents did not want him to be a Jesuit. He was also sure that God did want him to be a Jesuit. Once he was clear that

God wanted him to take this step the difficulty with regard to obeying his parents disappears, for all who believe in God know that His authority is above that of parents and is unlimited while the authority of parents has definite limitations.

It goes without saying that children have no obligation to obey their parents if they are ordered to do what is wrong or

sinful. It may not be so well known, though all Catholic moralists teach it, that parents have not the right to determine the careers of their children, still less to oppose them if they wish to follow a call of God to perfection. The natural law itself is against parents bringing any undue influence on their children in the choice of a state of life.

Stanislaus was fully convinced that God called him but he did not act merely on his own conviction. He consulted his own confessor who agreed that his religious vocation was genuine. He consulted others who were skilled in recognising a genuine call from God. The only difficulty anyone could detect was that arising from parental opposition. The Kostka family was sufficiently powerful to do serious damage to God's work if its wrath against the Jesuits was aroused. How could this be avoided? The only solution seemed to be that Stanislaus should go to a place that was well away from the Kostka sphere of influence.

That is why Father Antonio advised Stanislaus to go to Augsburg and agreed to give him a letter of introduction to Father Canisius.

Stanislaus had the letter in his possession when Paul told him to go. He decided to go on foot. If he went on horseback it would be easy to trace his movements and he would be brought back before he got to his destination. How far away was Augsburg? Stanislaus was faced with a three-hundred mile walk.

Father Antonio

Father Antonio had realised when speaking to Stanislaus that even when he did get to Augsburg that Father Canisius might not be willing to receive him so he also gave him a letter to the Father General, Francis Borgia, who lived in

Rome. Stanislaus would carry with him letters to two men who are now canonised. It must be unique in the annals of the saints to find a saint with letters of introduction to two other saints.

Fortified with Father Antonio's blessing and letters Stanislaus set about making his preparations for departure. He would not need much; some clothes of the type worn by poorer people, for in spite of Paul's complaints, Stanislaus usual clothes would have stamped him as a wealthy young man on any road. He would need also a strong pair of boots for the long road ahead and a pilgrim's staff. One of the servants of the household who had become very devoted to Stanislaus got the clothes for him as it would have been courting the danger of immediate discovery for him to buy them himself.

The preparations were made and Stanislaus waited for a suitable occasion to leave Vienna. He had not long to wait for the signal. On August 16th, 1567 Paul attacked him in anger. Paul was amazed when his brother threatened to leave if he did not allow him to live in peace. When Paul told him to go away, Stanislaus knew that the hour had come and next day he was on the road to Augsburg.

Flight

It was early on Sunday 17th, when Stanislaus quietly left the house carrying the bundle of clothes that he would wear on the road. To delay the inevitable pursuit he had told Laurence Pacifici to let his brother know that he would not be in to dinner. He then went to the Jesuit Church to hear an early Mass and to receive Holy Communion. Spiritually fortified after Mass he left the city carrying the bundle with his unobtrusive clothes and some food for the journey.

Once he got into the open country Stanislaus changed and gave away the clothes he had been wearing to a surprised poor wayfarer he met on the road. He was now a pilgrim travelling light as a poor pilgrim should. The way before him was long and he wanted to get as far as he could from Vienna before he was missed and the pursuit would start. He walked all day and when night came could sleep the sleep of the just after a long hot day.

Early next morning he was on his way again. In Vienna Paul Kostka was also up early. He had at last realised that Stanislaus had really gone. At six o'clock he was at the Jesuit college to ask the Fathers what they had done with his brother. Paul was not polite in his manner of asking. He called the Fathers kidnappers and deceivers of the young. When they denied knowing where Stanislaus had gone, he called them liars. In the meantime Bilinski had found a letter from Stanislaus in a Greek lexikon. He ran to the college to tell Paul. The truth was out. Stanislaus had run away and was apparently on foot. It should not be hard to catch up with him since he was on foot and Paul had a shrewd idea of the direction that his brother had taken. Bilinski recounted that, though they followed with all possible speed, they could not overtake him. In this statement Bilinski was not quite accurate as they did in fact overtake Stanislaus but they did not recognise him. This fact we have on the testimony of Stanislaus himself in a letter he wrote shortly afterwards. 'Close to Vienna two of my servants overtook me. As soon as I recognised them I hid myself in a wood hard by and thus escaped their pursuit. After climbing a number of hills and passing through many a wood, when I was refreshing myself with some bread by the side of a clear stream, I heard the tramp of a horse. I got up and looked at the rider. It was Paul. His steed was covered with foam and his face was hotter than the sun. You can fancy how frightened I was.

'All chance of flight was gone because of the rate at which he was riding so I stood still. Plucking up courage I went to the horseman and just like a pilgrim begged respectfully for an alms. He asked about his brother, described his dress and height to me and said he was very much like myself in appearance. I replied that in the early morning he had gone along this road. Without waiting a moment he put spur to his horse, threw me some money and went off at a gallop.

As soon as I had thanked the holy Virgin, my Mother Mary, I betook myself to a cave nearby to avoid being pursued. After staying there a short time I resumed my journey.

Protected

Though he had failed to bring back his brother, Paul did not give up the attempt to find him. He sent messengers to every town and village near Vienna with a minute description of Stanislaus and instructions that he was to be informed if the boy was seen. How then did it happen that Stanislaus was not apprehended and brought back? Was he miraculously shielded by God? One cannot be sure that there was any miracle though God was undoubtedly looking after his child. There is at least a partial explanation from natural causes for Stanislaus avoiding recognition. Paul had stressed, in his description, the clothes that his brother had been wearing, not realising that Stanislaus had changed them immediately after leaving Vienna. Paul obviously under-rated his brother's intelligence.

Stanislaus never told the details of the journey to Augsburg perhaps because it was uneventful. We know however of his meeting with an unnamed Jesuit priest who was travelling to Dillingen. This Father gave Stanislaus a lift for part of his journey - a very short part - and offered to bring him all the way but Stanislaus insisted that he was a pilgrim and as a

pilgrim he would travel. He walked over twenty miles a day on that pilgrimage. He was not yet seventeen years old.

When he got to Augsburg Stanislaus went directly to look for the Jesuit Father Provincial. The Brother who answered the door had to tell him that Father Canisius was away at Dillingen which was twenty-five miles from Augsburg. It was early morning and Stanislaus had not eaten but, in company of one of the Fathers from Augsburg, he set out on the road again. He wished to receive Holy Communion that morning and seeing a church on the roadside went in to hear Mass. The church was deserted and after a few minutes it dawned on him that this church had been taken over by the Lutherans. He could not receive Holy Communion. But the Lord is never outdone in generosity and again Stanislaus was the recipient of a divine favour, for there in a church that had ceased to be Catholic, an angel was sent to give him divine Food for the last lap of the journey.

Saint Peter Canisius

It was late in the day when they got to Dillingen. Stanislaus gave the letter to Father Canisius but the first meeting of these two saints was a brief one. The Provincial told Stanislaus to have a good meal and a long sleep and that they could discuss matters after that.

The next day Stanislaus had a long talk with the Father Provincial. Father Antonio's letter had told him of Stanislaus' goodness and of his desire to become a Jesuit but Father Canisius had to see for himself if he should admit the boy. He agreed willingly to admit Stanislaus on probation. He knew what Stanislaus had suffered for his ideal but wished to make sure of his obedience and humility. He sent him to work in the kitchen. Stanislaus was never more content. He wrote afterwards 'I found heaven in the midst of pots and

pans.' He gave universal satisfaction during this period and Peter Canisius had no further doubts about the genuineness of the vocation of Stanislaus Kostka.

After further discussions with Stanislaus he decided to send him to Rome in order to be as far away as possible from the danger of his father's wrath. Two young Jesuits had to make the eight-hundred mile journey to Rome at the time so Stanislaus would go with them. In the letter which Saint Peter Canisius wrote to Father General, Saint Francis Borgia, he spoke of Saint Stanislaus as a noble, virtuous and studious youth. He explained why he was sending him to Rome and said finally 'I look for great things from him.'

The exact date of Stanislaus' birth is not known but on the day that he set out on his second long trek, 25th September, 1567, he was within about a week of his seventeenth birthday. This journey started from Munich so Stanislaus must have gone there some few days earlier. The journeys of Stanislaus are impressive. From his leaving Vienna to his arrival at Rome he walked about twelve hundred miles. He must have been an unusually healthy young man as Saint Peter Canisius, who was always most considerate and solicitous about the health of everyone, except himself, reminded Father Francis Borgia that the two who were to accompany Stanislaus might not be too well but he made no such reference concerning the youngest member of the trio.

The Long Walk

Stanislaus felt much happier setting out on this journey than he had on leaving Vienna. For one thing, he was no longer a fugitive in constant fear of capture and secondly he had with him two companions. Stanislaus had not yet started his novitiate so he was dressed as a pilgrim with a sleeveless

cloak reaching to his knees and a cape covering his shoulders. A wide brimmed hat completed his uniform.

The journey to Rome was not only a long one but it was also dangerous. The peril of travel in those days was expressed in the saying that the would-be traveller had better do two things: make his peace with God and make his will.

Details of the journey have not come down to us but we have a very fair idea of the route they travelled. The road at first led them due south across the comparatively level tablelands of southern Bavaria from Munich to the northern frontiers of Tyrol. So far the going was easy and swift. After this stage their rate of advance slowed down considerably, Tyrol is a country of ups and downs, but more frequently up, as the land moves towards the foothills of the Tyrolian Alps. It was late in the year and the cold winds added to the fatigue of the journey. It was a long and exhausting climb as the air became colder and more rarified while the road coiled upwards towards the distant white peaks with their everlasting snow. In the Brenner Pass it was bitterly cold and wintry.

Well nigh as exhausting was the long descent from the top of Italy's northern mountain wall; first through rough, craggy, barren stretches of land where torrents twisted their way through narrow gorges; next across sodden pine woods of dripping trees; at last into meadows bathed in golden sunlight opening into the green and beautiful valleys which lead into the plains of northern Italy. South they went, always southwards, past Trent and on to Bologna.

Stanislaus had already come a long way: from Dillingen to Munich, from Munich to Innsbruck, across the Brenner Pass to Bolzano, Salerno, Trent, Verona, Mantua and Bologna. Bologna was half-way to Rome.

From Bologna the road veered sharply in a southeastern direction to where Rimini stood, its walls washed by the Adriatic Sea. Stanislaus, who had never seen the sea before now, viewed it for days on end as they continued southwards skirting the sea until they reached Loreto. There they prayed at Mary's famous shrine and with renewed courage started on the last lap of the journey.

From Loreto the road swung west across the width of leg-shaped central Italy, ran across the bewildering mass of hills that form the Apennine Range, and across the lesser Savine Hills, whence it descended into the great Roman Plain. From Bologna to Forli they had gone, from Forli to Rimini, then Fano, Ancona, Loreto and finally Rome. Rome at last after a weary month of travelling, from September 25th to October 25th 1567 on which day Stanislaus and his companions entered the Eternal City. Truly now, was Stanislaus Kostka an experienced traveller.

In the meantime, once Paul was convinced that Stanislaus had got away, he set out on horseback with some companions and servants for Poland. It was not a cheerful journey for Paul as the words of his brother, spoken the day before his flight, kept ringing in his ears: 'This will end in my going away and not coming back and you will have to explain to Mother and Father.' How was Paul going to explain his brother's flight from Vienna without committing himself?

John Kostka

Although the feared explanation was never to be given owing to John Kostka's willingness to believe the worst about the Jesuits, the case was by no means closed. Stanislaus' father really loved him and though his love was a selfish one he was quite determined not to be separated from him for any longer than he must. He set in motion the machinery

which would restore his son to him. He wrote a furious letter to Cardinal Hosius in which he not only complained but threatened. The Jesuits had, he affirmed, ridden roughshod over his paternal rights and if they did not return his son to him he would have their house at Poltava closed at once and would see to it that no other Jesuits were allowed to set foot in Poland.

In the interim Stanislaus and his companion had arrived in Rome after an incredibly fast walk. They had done over eight-hundred miles in thirty days, an average of over twenty-six miles a day. That speed would be fast for any human being. It was really astonishing for a boy of seventeen and there is no doubting its having happened.

It may seem strange in writing of a saint to say so little of his interior life but in a pamphlet of this nature one can only give indications of his spirituality. Even without stressing the prayers and mortifications and the extraordinary union with God and love of his Mother Mary, we can see clearly one whose strength was from God and who proved his love by his acts. His great spirit was quite undaunted by obstacles.

He was God's great walker and no distance was too great for him as he walked with God.

Saint Francis Borgia

After a few days' rest Saint Francis Borgia allowed Stanislaus to begin his novitiate. His arrival did not cause a stir for there were many other novices and he had not even the distinction of being the only Pole nor the only nobleman in the Noviceship.

Shortly after he had become a novice Stanislaus received a letter from his father. It was not a kind letter. The father told

his son that he had disgraced the name of Kostka by travelling through Germany and Italy dressed as a beggar.

He said that he would have him brought back to Poland from Rome and that when he was home he would have no opportunities of seeing anyone as he would be chained up in prison. He ordered his son to come quickly before he was taken home by force.

This letter hurt Stanislaus but it did not make him change his mind. Neither, however, did it produce in him any bitterness against his father.

Writing Home

'Dearest Father', he wrote in reply, 'why should my entrance into the Society of Jesus make you grieve as you do? On the contrary, you should rejoice thereat and render unceasing thanks to God. Parents here below are ever so happy when they see their children enter the service and household of great men though the latter may die and may at any time disappear. All the more should you rejoice because I have given myself entirely to God who will never abandon me in this life and Who will hereafter richly repay every service rendered to Him, be it ever so small.

Do not cherish the hope that you will ever make me change my mind! Already I have bound myself to God by vowing Him chastity, poverty and obedience. Rather shall I endure suffering and torments and death itself, than give up the state of life which I have chosen.

You cannot give a better proof of your love of me than by praying to God to bless my holy resolve and to bestow on me His grace that I may persevere to the last of my days so that the end may be in keeping with the beginning. By

doing so you will acquire great merit before God, Our Lord; and I shall likewise be everlastingly grateful to you.'

It is an extraordinary tribute to Stanislaus' loyalty that while he refused to abandon his position, he retained his respect for his father. When a Polish Jesuit told him of the letter which his father had written to Cardinal Hosius, Stanislaus, after listening, said half-tearfully, half-smilingly, 'My father would certainly think and act differently if he could but know how my heart overflows with gladness because of the great grace God has conferred on me in leading my steps to the Society of Jesus. They were difficult steps to tread.'

From his earliest childhood Stanislaus had shown great holiness. There was nothing showy about his goodness but he had an unfailing devotion to God's will and an exceptional love for Our Lady. His holiness was tried in the fire during his persecution at Vienna but he refused to lessen his devotion to God for any cause. During his illness Our Lady had made clear what his vocation was and once he knew this there was no power on earth which could stop him from carrying it out. He would walk the path to God till he could do what Our Lady had told him to do. There are wonders and miracles in the life of Stanislaus but it was not these which made him a saint. God showed the way and gave the strength but it was he himself who must walk the long road to Rome.

Jesuit Novice

Once he was admitted into the novitiate the hardest part of his struggle was over. He was now with others who were trying like himself to do the will of God in all things and the will of God was made clear in the minute and detailed order of time and the directions of the Master of Novices. A saint is not really conspicuous in a novitiate where there is little

opportunity or encouragement for heroics though there is real heroism in the perfect performance of all the duties of the day; in prayer, in work, in recreation. There is no doubt of the heroism of Stanislaus in this period of his life. It was not that he did many things which were conspicuous but that all that he did was done with that thoroughness and devotion which are so difficult to keep up continuously.

Those who lived with him in the novitiate had no doubts about his sanctity. His love of God and of Our Lady had that utter sincerity that cannot be hidden.

After his death Saint Francis Borgia ordered Father Fazio, Stanislaus' Master of Novices, to write a brief account of his life, which could be sent to all the houses of the Society of Jesus for the edification of its members. This had never been done before for one who died as a novice. The saint in Francis Borgia could recognise true sanctity. To fill in some of the details of Stanislaus' life I shall quote freely from Father Fazio's account, from the time of his arrival at Rome.

'He was welcomed in the city of Rome by our Father-General and sent by him to the Novitiate of Sant' Andrea and no words can describe his many virtues and exemplary life which was for all a pattern and a mirror of religious perfection while he was there.

He was most humble and never spoke of his noble parentage. His modesty was admirable and his obedience knew no wavering. He carried out every order as though it came from God Himself. He revered God in his Superior and obeyed his Superior as though he were obeying God, with readiness and alacrity.

He was always kind in his dealings with others but strict and hard on himself. It was necessary to restrain his

mortifications by obedience lest he should imperil his health. Superiors looked on him as the perfect religious as described in the Constitutions by Father Ignatius.

He prayed always and lived constantly in the presence of God. He was entirely absorbed both in God and in the task assigned to him, combining prayer and work, work and prayer.

His favourite topic of conversation was two-fold; he loved to speak of the Blessed Virgin Mary constantly referring to her as 'My Mother and always behaved like a most devoted son, honouring her as much as he could. He also loved to speak of his call to the Society, a grace which he held in such a high esteem that words failed him to express his feelings. He publicly declared that this was the greatest grace he had received, a compendium of all the other heavenly gifts because it had conferred upon him all that was good and divinely shielded him from all that was evil. It had changed for him the earth into a paradise and in heaven alone was there greater happiness than in the Society.

Towards the beginning of the month of August of this year, after listening to an exhortation given in our novitiate by our Father Peter Canisius, he began to be consumed with a great desire to suffer martyrdom and he no longer cared to live. Meditating on the death of Saint Laurence on that saint's feast day (10th August) he had a bad fainting fit and became feverish. Though the fever abated, his desire to die was as strong as ever. A short time before, with great outpourings of love, he had written a letter to the most holy Virgin and had asked her to come and fetch him so that he might celebrate the coming feast of her Assumption in heaven.

He received Holy Communion that morning. Towards evening fever set in from which he told us he would not recover, since on the eve of the feast of the Assumption he would die - as actually came to pass. He prepared himself for death in the most saintly manner by receiving the Last Sacraments and was in constant converse with God and Our Lady and the saints.

No sooner had his soul left his body than throughout the whole city the news spread that a saint had died and people came crowding to venerate his last remains as those of a saint and to get for themselves some relic of him if they could do so. He was buried in a wooden coffin in our novitiate of Sant' Andrea. He was the first to be buried there so that his remains might hallow that place and prepare the way for others to follow him heavenwards.

This account, which I have shortened considerably is perfectly sincere and genuine. The account of Stanislaus' long walks may make us like him more and appreciate his courage and determination but the manifestations of sanctity and the signs and miracles were God's sign of acceptance and approval of heroic courage in the early battles.

Old Friends

The cause of Stanislaus' death is somewhat mysterious. He was a healthy young man and physically capable of great endurance as we know. His health was still good throughout most of the ten months he spent in the novitiate. He had nothing wrong with him at the time that his old friend, Saint Peter Canisius, came to Rome and gave the exhortation on 31st July. Father Canisius spoke on that day of the need for being always prepared as one does not know when God will call. After the exhortation, when Stanislaus was speaking

with the other novices, he said that while the Father's words were a salutary warning to all, that for himself they were God's own voice, as he was going to die that month. Though Stanislaus' words were remembered they were not taken seriously.

Death Of A Novice

Stanislaus became ill on the 10th August but not very seriously so. He affirmed that he would not recover but the Infirmarian told him that it would be a miracle if he died of such a mild indisposition. Yet Stanislaus affirmed that Our Lady would take him to heaven for the feast of her Assumption. He became progressively worse with the fever but not until the day before he died did anyone realise that he was nearing the end. He died as he had said, shortly before midnight on the 14th August, with the smile of one who was going home.

There is much we can learn from all the saints. There are many things we can learn from the life of Stanislaus, but one thing above all: the meaning of God's call. God calls at every moment of life. He calls to different ways of life. Once the call is clear then nothing must prevent it from being followed. Every resource must be utilised in the carrying out of the will of God.

In his childhood Stanislaus was brought up to know and love God and His Mother. He saw the importance of prayer and learned to pray. He was sent to Vienna to study and he studied. He saw that a certain type of behaviour was for him incompatible with a real love of God. He saw in the clarity of God's grace that what interfered with the true service of God must be got rid of. Paul was making the service of God impossible for him so he left Paul. His parents were in

opposition to the carrying out of what was clearly God's will - God's will must be done before all.

The mystery and the explanation of Saint Stanislaus' life is found in the words of our Saviour to His own mother: 'Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?'

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the booklet *Saint Stanislaus Kostka*, by Father Richard Brennan, S.J. It was written prior to 1893.

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The cover image is a detail of a stained glass window of Saint Stanislaus Kostka, 1909, artist unknown. It is in the parish church of the Three Holy Kings in Kinderbeuern, Germany. It was photographed on 24 November 2010 by Reinhardhauke, and the image was swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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